

SLIDE 1:
The Race is Not to the Swift

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Nazarene Bible College Chapel--March 17, 2009--Finish the Race, Keep the Faith!

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

II Timothy 4:7

Introductory Comments

SLIDE 2: Happy St. Patrick's Day

Who was Saint Patrick?

Saint Patrick was kidnapped from England at the age of 16 by pirates and sold into slavery in Ireland. During his 6-year captivity, he found strength in his religious faith.

What did he do?

After he escaped, Saint Patrick felt called to return to Ireland with the Christian faith. He studied religion in Europe, then travelled to Ireland to spread Christianity.

What about the Shamrock?

He used the shamrock, which resembles a three-leafed clover, as a metaphor to explain the concept of the Trinity (father, son, Holy Spirit).

What about Luck?

Tradition now says that if you find a shamrock on St. Patrick's Day, your luck will double.

Do you realize how many traditions or superstitions are ways to bring good luck?

Good Luck

- Finding a four-leaf clover brings good luck
- An acorn brings good luck and ensures a long life
- Spit on the new basket ball before using to make it lucky
- Letting a frog into the house brings good luck
- If you see three butterflies together they will bring good luck. Or if the first butterfly you see in the year is white, it brings good luck to you throughout the year.
- If a black cat walks towards you it brings good luck; or if it walks away it means it takes away the good luck of you with it

- Sighting of chimney sweep is a good luck. Your wish will come into true when you sight it.
- If you pickup a coin when its heads up it is good luck; if its tails side up it is bad luck
- A cricket in the house brings good luck
- Counting two crows brings luck
- To wear new clothes on the Easter Sunday brings good luck
- The pictures of elephants that face a door bring good luck

On the flip side, is bad luck. I have only walked under a ladder once—it was a sermon illustration. I was in two car accidents that week! I may not believe in superstitions, but I am not walking under another ladder!

SLIDE 3: Finish the Race, Keep the Faith!

The theme for this year's chapel based on II Timothy 4:7—*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*

This is really the opposite of finding ways to bring good luck. It is about hard work bringing results—not luck. But then again, is luck not involved in winning a race? Is luck involved in any part of our lives? We will return to that thought, but first notice that this verse never mentions winning the race—the emphasis is on finishing! When I began reflecting on this verse, I thought about my life and your lives and the world and year we live in. I think most of us would agree that in many ways and at many levels, the best descriptive word would be “unexpected.”

For instance, at the beginning of each year our Chaplain comes to faculty members and asks if we would like to speak in chapel and if so, what night. So, I looked at my schedule and what I expected to be happening in my life and picked tonight. Well, here I am seven months later, and this would not have been the week I would have chosen! Several unexpected events have made this week extremely crazy for me. But here I am!

That is how life is, isn't it? What we plan for often comes to an unexpected end.

That makes me think of an old, old, fable—by Aesop . . .

SLIDE 4: The Tortoise and the Hare

A Hare one day ridiculed the short feet and slow pace of the Tortoise, who replied, laughing: "Though you be swift as the wind, I will beat you in a race." The Hare,

believing her assertion to be simply impossible, assented to the proposal; and they agreed that the Fox should choose the course and fix the goal. On the day appointed for the race the two started together. The Tortoise never for a moment stopped, but went on with a slow but steady pace straight to the end of the course. The Hare, lying down by the wayside, fell fast asleep. At last waking up, and moving as fast as he could, he saw the Tortoise had reached the goal, and was comfortably dozing after her fatigue.

Why did the Hare lose the race? Was it Pride? Lack of motivation? Incorrect expectations?

SLIDE 5: The Important Question

Really, the important question is why did the tortoise win?

Slow and steady wins the race

Refusal to give up

Consistency

Keeping the goal in sight

Plodding determination

Realistic expectations

Think about it, the turtle probably never thought he could beat the hare and he was probably as surprised as anyone that he won. He set out to finish the race, do the best he could, and perchance, win. But he did win—how unexpected.

SLIDE 6: Maybe Even More Important FOR US!

God intends for us to finish the race by doing our best, the rest is up to Him.

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

2 Timothy 4:7

You may remember the story of **Eric Moussambani**—"The Eel" from Equatorial Guinea at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney. He gained notoriety when he swam the entire heat by himself as his 2 other opponents were eliminated due to false starts. The country of Equatorial Guinea has no Olympic-sized swimming pool. He drew a wild card position in the 100-meter race and swam the race alone. Although his time was disappointing, Eric managed to swim the entire race in 1 minute and 52.72 seconds (more like the speed for the 200-meter) it earned him a personal best and the quickest Equatorial Guinea time ever. Many were relieved after watching him struggle, that he actually completed the race. Eric was also thrilled to have completed the race—he said: "I'm going to jump and dance all night long in celebration of my personal triumph."

What was his triumph? Finishing the Race! Not first, not last, in fact, it wasn't actually a race, but he finished! That was the important thing!

SLIDE 7: Our Text

Our text for this evening talks about situations like this. It is an interesting verse in Ecclesiastes 9:11

I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.

Did you catch that? The race is not to the swift.

In life, what is unexpected is often exactly what happens.

Here is a quote with a refreshing way to look at all this:

SLIDE 8: Expect nothing, live frugally on surprise. Alice Walker

SLIDE 9: The Context

We know that the book of Ecclesiastes is poetry about the human condition--affliction, wisdom, life, love, and the nature and character of God. It is about those things we think about every day. It is about trying to make sense of life—and realizing that from a human perspective that is not possible. The reason we can't make sense of life is because we have expectations and quite often our expectations don't predict the future very well.

SLIDE 10: Expectations

What are expectations? Here is a definition:

In the case of uncertainty, expectation is what is considered the most likely to happen. An expectation, which is a belief that is centred on the future, may or may not be realistic. A less advantageous result gives rise to the emotion of disappointment. If something happens that is not at all expected it is a surprise.

SLIDE 11: Rational Expectations

Rational Expectation on the other hand are based on the idea that people rationally anticipate the future and respond to what they see ahead.

The sun will come up in the morning
Pikes Peak will be there when the fog clears
The chapel chair will provide a stable spot to sit down
Chapel will end and class will resume

Without rational expectations, life is chaos!
But the truth is . . .

SLIDE 12: The Truth Is. . .

Life *often* does not meet up to our expectations and this is why the writer in Ecclesiastes said: *The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.*

SLIDE 13: In fact. . .

Charlotte Bronte once said that:

Life is so constructed that an event does not, cannot, will not, match the expectation.

Those expectations sometimes make us fail. One of the things I do at NBC is to advise students. Sometimes students start classes, but don't finish. I try not to take this personally, but . . .

I researched reasons why this happens and found the following:

"Students tend to drop out because their expectations of college—academically, socially, or both—don't match up with the reality once they get there. . ."

<http://www.act.org/news/releases/2004/12-13-04.html>

To that I add, that sometimes Bible college does not meet up to the expectation of a Christian utopia!

SLIDE 14: Disappointment

In other words, students are sometimes disappointed!

This often comes out as anger about some incident, or at a person—student or professor.

In truth, "Anger always comes from frustrated expectations"

One of my favorite writers, Matthew Henry states about the verses in Ecclesiastes:

"We are often disappointed of the good we had great hopes of. Solomon had himself made the observation, and so has many a one since, that events, both in public and private affairs, do not always agree even with the most rational prospects and probabilities."

SLIDE 15: Current Affairs

The past few months have been an example of this—the expectations, rational expectation of many in our country have led to frustration and anger. I looked for a few headlines:

2009: Will It Be the Worst Year Since 1958?

Investors lost billions in Madoff's alleged 'giant Ponzi scheme'

The black hole of hopelessness can be overwhelming.

A man who lost \$1.4 billion to Bernie Madoff sits down in his Manhattan office and carefully writes a series of suicide letters to family and friends, then swallows a fatal dose of pills and conscientiously places a wastebasket under his bleeding arm, after slicing it with a box cutter.

- For many people, the world is upside down right now.
- Those that planned, have lost and found themselves in the same place as those that didn't plan.
- Those that thought their jobs were secure have discovered otherwise.
- Those that saved their money in banks instead of under mattresses have found that the mattress would have been safer.

The expectations of many have been crushed. So were are the answers?

SLIDE 16: Back to Ecclesiastes!

Remember the writer's words?

The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.

Was he describing our world? It is amazing how current the Bible can be! That is because the human condition is ever the same.

Matthew Henry explains it this way. . .

“The preacher here, for a further proof of the vanity of the world, and to convince us that all our works are in the hand of God, and not in our own hand, shows the uncertainty and contingency of future events, and how often they contradict the prospects we have of them.” Matthew Henry

SLIDE 17: So, What is the Point?

Well, LIFE IS CERTAINLY NOT POINTLESS! *The point is that life is uncertain, but God understands that.*

Again, Matthew Henry speaks to this:

“He had exhorted us (v. 10) to do what we have to do with all our might; but here he reminds us that, when we have done all, we must leave the issue with God, and not be confident of the success.”

In other words, it is not about us!

Though we may plan—good thing; strategize—another good thing; work hard—a very good thing; ultimately success –or failure is not ALWAYS because of us! Having done all we can do “we must leave the issue with God, and not be confident of the success.”

That is a hard truth isn't it? We want to believe that God will always bless our best effort, but sometimes we are just completely surprised by life. Our expectations for what an hour, day, or life holds are not always met.

SLIDE 18: The Unexpected

Think about this picture, which I am sure we all recognize!

Capt. (Sully) Sullenberger certainly did not anticipate that his day would turn out like this—neither did any of the crew or passengers of US Airways Flight 1549.

- The pilot was extremely competent,
- the crew was mature,
- the plane was in good mechanical condition—
- by all rational expectations, the flight should have been uneventful—

BUT A FLOCK OF BIRDS BROUGHT IT DOWN!

Since I am flying tomorrow, that doesn't make me feel too comfortable, but then the flip side of this is . . . who would think a plane could land in a river and some of the passengers could escape without even getting their feet wet? Ultimately, whatever the day holds, good or bad, winning the race, finishing the race, or falling flat on our face; our dependence must be on God who holds that day in His hands.

To conclude, I once again turn to a quote from Matthew Henry. In this quote, he speaks of our expectations and the answer—which is ultimately our humble dependence on God.

SLIDE 19: Humble Dependence

“The issue of affairs is often unaccountably cross to every one's expectation, that the highest may not presume, nor the lowest despair, but all may live in a humble dependence upon God, from whom every man's judgment proceeds.” Matthew Henry